

BCSPE

British Columbia Society for Public Education
Protecting the integrity of BC's public schools

Public Education Election Kit 2009

Table of Contents

Using this Election Kit.....	3
Who We Are	3
Statement of School Needs	3
Make public education an election issue	4
Develop Strategies	4
Identify the Candidates	4
About All Candidates Meetings.....	5
Prepare a questionnaire for candidates	5
Hold private meetings with each candidate	5
Prepare questions for supporters to ask	6
Use the media.....	6
Use electronic strategies	7
Sample Questions.....	8
Resources	10

This election kit was prepared by the BC Society of Education. Permission is hereby granted for the reproduction of any or all parts of this kit for non-profit purposes. For more information please contact 778.786.2838 or e-mail helesialuke@shaw.ca.

Revised April 2, 2009

Using this Election Kit

This kit is designed to help raise the profile of issues related to public education during election campaigns. It includes strategies for gathering information from politicians about their views and for drawing public and media attention to what the politicians are saying

For more information please visit www.bcspe.ca

Who We Are

The British Columbia Society for Public Education (BCSPE) was formed in early 2005 by a group of parents committed to protecting and improving public education in British Columbia. The members of BCSPE had been active participants in the Vancouver Save our Schools network.

Statement of School Needs

The Save Our Schools network wrote a Statement of School Needs. We believe that statement still holds true today.

Every Public School in British Columbia Needs:

- a principal
- well-educated and supported teachers
- a secretary
- an open library and a teacher-librarian

- access to music, art, language and physical education teachers
- up-to-date learning resources for every student
- adequate classroom supplies and equipment
- timely testing and appropriate services for children with special and gifted needs
- access to ESL programs and supports
- manageable class sizes that take into account the subject and age of students
- appropriate supports for children in inner city schools
- no waiting list for admission into local school
- adequate supervision of students while on school property
- a sufficient number and variety of both core and elective courses in every secondary school
- equipped playgrounds for every elementary school
- facilities that are clean, safe and in good repair

"Public education is the primary foundation in any civilized democracy... Any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of democracy."

—John Ralston Saul

Make public education an election issue

Elections can be won or lost on the basis of issues that matter to voters. Political parties do their best to define and shape the issues they want voters to talk about during the election, but voters and interest groups need not be limited to what the parties want. Voters can bring their own issues to the debate. Their effectiveness in doing so can determine whether their issue becomes an election issue.

Public education is a topic that many people care about. Education funding, in particular, is often in the news. Politicians understand that public education can become a pivotal election issue. The job for community groups is to raise the profile of the issue within the context of the election, then to make voters aware of what the various politicians are saying and doing about strengthening public education.

Develop Strategies

There are a variety of strategies you can use to heighten the profile of public education as an election issue. Through these strategies, your two major goals are:

to put politicians in a position where they must respond in a serious way;
and

to have voters base their voting decisions, at least in part, on where the politicians stand on public education.

The size of your organization and your available time and resources will be factors in what strategies you decide to pursue.

Identify the Candidates

Elections BC (www.elections.bc.ca) can help you locate BC provincial political parties and candidate information.

For contact information, you can either search the internet for candidate websites directly or check for links on the party websites. The major party websites active in BC are listed below:

www.bcliberals.com
www.bcndp.ca
www.greenparty.bc.ca

"....put politicians in a position where they must respond in a serious way."

About All Candidates Meetings

Open political forums typically last for a fixed amount of time, usually two hours. Determine beforehand whether the question period is open-mic or pre-registered.

If it is an open-mic format, get there early to take a seat near the audience microphone and stand up at the microphone as soon as the floor is opened for questions.

Develop 4 or 5 questions from which supporters can choose. You do not need to cover the whole issue in one question. In fact, it is easier for voters to follow the question and keep track of whether it gets answered if it is focused on a single subject, e.g., funding, class size, support for special needs.

Keep the preamble to each question very short and directly related to the question. That way, if there is time and opportunity, more than one person can ask a question, without the questions sounding repetitive.

Prepare a questionnaire for candidates

and publish their responses

If your organization is well-known in your community, you may be able to convince candidates to fill out a short questionnaire about public education.

They will be more motivated to do this if they know you will publish the

results in a way that could reach a large number of voters, e.g., on your website and through a printed or electronic newsletter.

In preparing your questionnaire it is a good idea to ask just a few general and open-ended questions to make it clear you are genuinely interested in their views. Politicians will ignore questions that pre-judge the answer or appear to be leading them into a trap.

Hold private meetings with each candidate

Candidates look for ways to become more knowledgeable about issues that are important to voters. Information you provide can help make public education a bigger part of a politician's platform.

Ask for a meeting and let them know how many people are coming. Make it clear you have asked for meetings with candidates from all parties.

Leave brochures and factual information about your school or organization and about public education. Let the candidates know they are welcome to contact you again for more information.

Prepare questions for supporters to ask

When candidates or their canvassers go knocking on doors or telephoning voters, make sure your supporters are prepared with questions about public education.

If canvassers are unprepared to answer questions about public education on behalf of the candidate, your supporters can ask to have the candidate call them back.

Use the media

There are many ways to access the media that do not involve spending money on advertising. Here are a few examples:

- **Find out when candidates will be on call-in shows** and have supporters ready to call in with questions.

If you get through, use the preamble to your question to educate listeners about your issue. For example:

Years ago the government promised to get rid of all portable classrooms and yet today, my child spends her school day in a portable. What will you do to provide all children with an appropriate classroom?

- **Issue a media release** with candidate responses to your questionnaire.

A media release is a written document that provides details about the story you think is

newsworthy. Media releases usually follow a specific format and are sent to media early in the day – and never on a Friday! See the resource section for links to examples.

- **Respond to news stories** with letters to editor.

Don't underestimate the value of a letter to the editor. Organizing your supporters to write letters to the editor can be an effective way to get your message out. It also demonstrates that the public cares about your issue and may lead the newspaper or other media to cover your issue in greater detail.

Remember to keep your letter within the paper's maximum word count.

- **Place an opinion editorial** about public education in your area.

The term “op ed” is short for ‘opposite the editorial’ or ‘opinion editorial’. It is an opinion or commentary article that is published opposite the editorial page in most newspapers. Anyone can submit an op ed to a newspaper.

"Tell me something new about something I care about."

- Barbara Frum, Award Winning Canadian Journalist

Use electronic strategies

- Seek out networks and bloggers and encourage them to post and distribute your information.

If you or someone you know has a blog or contributes to blog posts, encourage them to post links and discussion points about public education. Use the talking points at the end of this kit and add your own.

- Use your e-mail signature to link to networks and blogs. For example:

Sincerely,
Jane Doe
I support public education.
Visit www.xyz.ca to find out why.

- Use your facebook page to post comments and links to articles and resources.

Have you read a good letter to the editor, article or op ed about public education? Share it with your friends and colleagues. Link to it by pasting the URL into your Facebook link field or send a link out through regular e-mail.

The Facebook logo, consisting of the word "facebook" in white lowercase letters on a dark blue rectangular background.

Join us for discussion
on Facebook at BC
Society for Public
Education

The logo for the BC Society for Public Education, featuring the text "BC Society for Public EDUCATION" in white on a dark blue background. A small square symbol is positioned between "Public" and "EDUCATION".The logo for the Public Education Election Kit 2009, featuring the text "Public Education Election Kit 2009" in blue on a white background. The words "Election Kit" are underlined.

Sample Questions

Sample questions provided here are meant as a starting point. Your school community or organization will likely have additional and specific questions that can be raised.

General

Historically, each time a new government is elected, public education is one of the first areas politicians where make changes. Political parties have different ideas about the role of public education in our society.

- What do you see as government's primary responsibility with respect to public education?
- In general, what is your party's education platform?
- What role do MLAs have in supporting public schools?
- What will you do to protect and enhance public education?

Funding

Often, parents get involved in significant fundraising activities to assist their children's schools. In many instances, the funds raised go to support core educational expenses.

- In your view is parent fundraising necessary?

In some school districts, corporate sponsorships have been a source of money for cash strapped schools.

- What is your opinion of advertising and corporate sponsorships in schools?
- What are your thoughts on Direct Access Gaming Grants?
- Why must Parent Advisory Councils apply for this funding when all schools are eligible to receive it?

Many people believe that elementary students benefit from access to safe playgrounds. The provincial government established a temporary grant program through Community Gaming Grants. In the first year of this program, the Minister of Education's home riding received 11 of the 96 playground grants.

- What would you do to ensure that well-maintained and safe playgrounds are available to all children in BC?

Safety

There are approximately 11,000 classes in BC with 4 or more students with special needs and over 3,000 classes with more than the recommended 30 student limit.

- What is your opinion on class sizes? If elected, how will your party ensure that class size and composition allow all students to thrive?

While governments always say student safety is a priority, the work to ensure all BC students are spending their days in seismically safe schools is far behind the the previously public schedule.

- What would you do to ensure that schools are as safe as we can make them?

The public is becoming more aware of health risks associated with the use of toxic chemicals and materials. Many employers have taken steps to ensure workplaces are free from toxins found in things like asbestos, lead piping, pesticides, paint and cleaning products.

- If elected what will you do to reduce or eliminate students' exposure to harmful toxins in public schools?

Equal Access

Well-stocked and accessible school libraries are a key factor in ensuring all children have opportunities to read and learn. Yet, over the past few years in many districts, school libraries have been forced to reduce their teacher-librarian time as well as the hours during the day that the library is open.

- How will you ensure that all children in BC have access to their school libraries and teacher librarians?

Curriculum

In 2005, the government made changes that required students to pass mandatory, standardized tests in grades 10 and 11 (in addition to a pre-existing test for grade 12). Some people believe these tests are a useful 'quality control' measure, others think they introduce another obstacle to student success, focusing class time on studying for tests rather than other, more enriched learning activities.

- What is your view on standardized tests? Do these tests serve our students?

Equity

Studies on graduation rates have shown that, as a society, we are failing to meet the needs of First Nations and aboriginal students.

- If elected, how will you improve the educational outcomes for these students?

Canada is actively recruiting immigrants. Once here, new immigrants often do not have access to the services needed to settle successfully.

- What will you do to ensure that schools meet the needs of children who have come from other countries? How do you think schools can assist with the successful settlement of children in Canada?

For the fifth year in a row BC has recorded the highest child poverty rate in Canada. One in every four children lives below the poverty line. The Chief Public Health Officer of Canada has commented that children who live in low income families score lower on school readiness indicators.

- If elected what will you and your party do to alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life for economically disadvantaged students and their families?

Experts tell us that early intervention greatly assists children with special needs and yet many school districts are reporting long wait lists for educational testing.

- Do you think we are presently meeting the needs of children with special education requirements?
- If elected, what would you do to ensure the needs of each child are met in our schools?

Parent-run Organizations

- In your view, what is the best role for parents in public education?
- Do you think Parent Advisory Councils are an effective way for parents to be involved in schools?

A few years ago, the BC government legislated the creation of School Planning Councils (SPCs) that require the participation of 3 parents at each school.

- In your view, how effective are SPCs?

Over the past eight years, the provincial government has increased funding to the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils. Some people estimate that 2006 – 2007 alone BCCPAC has received nearly 2 million dollars from the Ministry of Education.

- Do you think this is an effective way to spend public education dollars?

Resources

Please visit our website at <http://bceducation.wordpress.com/> for a current list of resources. Click on the 'resources' page.